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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the incidence of behavior disordered children in selected elementary classrooms as perceived by the regular classroom teacher. Two hundred four elementary teachers categorized students according to their perceptions of the students' needs for special services. The categories were defined as mild, moderate, or severely behavior disordered. The data were analyzed by perceived disorder and by sex and race of the students. The results are discussed, and it was found that the total mean of children thought to require special services was sixteen percent. It was concluded that the needs of behavior disordered children are not being adequately met. Implications for teacher competencies and administrative arrangements are made. Changes in three areas are suggested: preservice teacher preparation, inservice teacher training, and the provision of self contained and resource classes for behavior disordered students. (FG)

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With the passage of P.L. 94-142, The Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975, public schools were mandated to provide an appropriate education to all school-aged children, regardless of the severity of their handicap. This education was to be made available in the least restrictive environment, and progress toward this goal was to be monitored by local and state education agencies.

One rudimentary method used to determine whether or not behavior disordered (BD) children are being appropriately served in the least restrictive environment is to compare the number of children labeled behavior disordered receiving special educational services with a commonly accepted prevalency or incidence estimate. Unfortunately, there is a wide variation among these estimates of behavior disordered school-aged children and youth. Published estimates range from a low of 1.5% to a high of 69.3% (Kelly, Bullock, and Dykes, 1977; Rubin & Ballow, 1978), with Bower's estimate of 10% being a frequently cited figure (Bower, 1970). With such a wide variation in estimates, it is doubtful whether this technique could be validly used.

Another method that could be used to determine if BD children are being appropriately served is to survey regular classroom teachers as to their perceptions of the incidence of behavior disorders in their general education classrooms. If children are perceived as being in need of special education services

by their regular classroom teachers and are not receiving services, it could be tentatively concluded that, as a group, BD children remain unserved or underserved. It was, therefore, the purpose of this study to determine the incidence of behavior disordered children in selected elementary classrooms as perceived by the regular classroom teachers.

Method

A modified version of a research questionnaire designed by Kelly, Bullock, and Dykes (1974) was completed by 204 elementary teachers in 3 South Carolina school districts (1 urban, 1 suburban, 1 rural). The teachers categorized their students according to their perceptions of the students' needs for special services. The categories used in the questionnaire were mild, moderate, and severe behavior disorders. These terms were defined as follows:

> Mild Behavior Disorders Children or youth with behavior disorders who you believe can be helped adequately by their regular classroom teacher and/or other school resource personnel through periodic counseling and/or short-term individual attention and instruction.
>
> Moderate Behavior Disorders Children or youth with behavior disorders who you believe can remain at their assigned schools but require rather intensive help from one or more specialists (e.g. counselors, special educators, etc.) and/or specialists from community agencies (mental

health clinics, diagnostic centers, etc.)

Severe Behavior Disorders Children or youth who you believe have a behavior disorder requiring assignment to a special class or special school.

Results

The data were analyzed by degree of perceived disorder, by sex of the students, and race of the students. The results were as follows:

1. The total mean of elementary children (n=5599) perceived by teachers (n=204) as requiring special services for behavior disorders was 16.00%. Teachers rated 12.14% of their students as mildly behavior disordered; 3.05% as moderately behavior disordered; and .82% as severely behavior disordered.
2. The comparison of behavior disorders in males and females as perceived by their teachers revealed that 11.12% of the males were considered behavior disordered in all categories, and 4.88% of the females were considered BD in all categories. Teachers rated 8.22% of their male students and 3.92% of their female students as mild BD; 2.30% of the males and .73% of the females as moderate BD; and .60% of the males and .23% of the females as severe BD.
3. The comparison of BD in white and black children as perceived by their teachers revealed that 8.50% of the

white children and 7.50% of the black children were considered BD in all categories. Teachers rated 6.39% of their white students and 5.75% of their black students as mild BD; 1.63% of their white students and 1.41% of their black students as moderate BD; and .48% of their white and .34% of their black students as severe BD.

Conclusions and Implications

The results of this study lead the researchers to the conclusion that there are several serious concerns relative to the achievement of the goal of an appropriate education for all behavior disordered children. The conclusion is that there are, in the regular classroom, essentially three separate groups of BD children whose needs are not being adequately met. These groups are: 1) the unserved, 2) the underserved, and 3) those children whose behaviors deviate from the norm enough to cause concern but who do not, in fact, require services which are distinctly different from those received by average children.

The first group, the unserved severely behavior disordered, consists of those pupils whose inappropriate behaviors deviate from the modal behaviors of the total group to the extent that they would be most appropriately educated in a self-contained classroom setting. This is not to suggest that these individuals will need that environment permanently. The ultimate goal is to return these children to the least restrictive setting as soon as possible. Although it is presently impossible to discern the exact number of pupils who comprise this group, it is clear that

there are significant numbers of them in regular classrooms.

Group two, the underserved moderately behavior disordered, includes those who demonstrate inappropriate behaviors, while not serious enough to warrant full-time special class placement, are better managed by the provision of additional educational services. These additional resources may range from consultation with a special class teacher to part-time placement in a resource room. The assertion that the needs of this group of children cannot be met by regular class teachers is not an indictment of their preparation or competencies. It is, rather, a further illustration of the fact that the needs of many children cannot be fully met by any one person.

Those children who are members of the third group, the mildly behavior disordered, are perhaps the most difficult with which we must deal. They are the ones who, in the regular classroom, need some special, but not extraordinary, assistance in managing their own behaviors. They are, furthermore, those children, who if placed in a classroom with a teacher who possesses a tolerance for a wider range of behaviors which could be considered as acceptable, would not merit any particular attention. The needs of this group are diverse, and so are the strategies for meeting them. These diversities, however, when examined, are potentially overwhelming for the regular class teachers. Again, this is not intended as a criticism of those teachers.

There are then, several implications regarding teacher competencies and administrative arrangements for children in all three groups. The needs of those children with moderate and severe behavior disorders can only be met if there are enough self-contained

classes and resource rooms with properly prepared and certified special teachers. It also seems that at both the preservice and inservice level, regular class teachers need to be knowledgeable about the characteristics of behavior disordered pupils and be competent in the identification and referral process. Additionally, the articulation between regular and special class teachers must be enhanced. This will admittedly be a difficult task, though one which can be accomplished if those responsible at the preservice and inservice levels are sensitive to the need.

As previously mentioned, the most complex issue may be meeting the needs of children in the third group, those with mild behavior disorders. The contention is that these individuals can be most appropriately educated by the regular classroom teacher; there is no need for resources beyond the confines of the regular classroom. The authors, while rejecting the notion of all teachers being all things to all children, do suggest that at the preservice level, teachers be prepared to deal with more variance within the regular classroom. While there has been a tacit admission of the existence of a great deal of heterogeneity in a typical classroom, it is felt that teachers have been ill-prepared to deal with the amount of variance (academically and behaviorally) which exists in reality. Teachers must be prepared to cope with a wider range of behaviors in the regular classroom. This is not to say that teachers should be encouraged to adopt a permissive attitude which would result in an environment not conducive to learning. It is, rather, a suggestion that teachers be trained in the direct, systematic observation of behavior; that teachers be prepared to assess behavior in terms of acuteness or chronicity; that teachers

be competent in judging behavior in relation to context, frequency, intensity, and duration.

Teachers must also possess competence in the area of behavior management. They must have the skills necessary for the management of individual and group behaviors. As opposed to the concept of discipline, they must be managers whose ultimate goal is assisting each child in the management of his/her own behavior with only minimal external influence.

In summary, whatever the "true" incidence of behavior disordered children in regular classrooms, many are there - and they are not receiving appropriate services. In order to meet their needs, change is needed in three areas: 1) preservice teacher preparation, 2) inservice teacher training, and 3) provision of self-contained and resource classes for behavior disordered pupils.

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